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978-0-521-58840-9 - Making Choices: A Recasting of Decision Theory

Frederic Schick

Excerpt

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1

DIFFICULT CHOICES

LIFE is a long trip in a cheap car. In a dark country. Without a good map. Not knowing the roads, we must stop at each fork to make a decision, to choose in some way. How well, in the end, we think the trip went depends on how well we chose. But choosing is often difficult.

1 SCOUNDREL TIME

Suppose you are under heavy pressure to bring certain charges against your friends. You know that your friends have done no wrong, but that your making these charges against them would cause them a lot of trouble. Suppose, if you didn't, you might go to jail, that you would certainly lose your job, perhaps your career and your future. What are you going to do? In the early 1950s, many people had to ask themselves this. It wasn't an idle question for them. They knew that any day they might be called on for their answer.

For Lillian Hellman, the day arrived in February of 1952. A subpoena had come from Washington, from the House Committee on Un-American Activities, a summons like those many other writers and artists had already received. She was invited to testify, to answer questions about her political views and about those of others, to say that this or that person had once belonged to some leftist group or been at some socialist meeting or contributed to some left-leaning fund. None of this was against the law, and she knew many such people. But if she mentioned any of them, they would be in serious trouble. If she

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refused, she could be held in contempt of Congress, in which case she would be jailed. She might explain her refusal to speak by pleading the Fifth Amendment, saying that her testimony could incriminate her. That would take her off the hook, but it would mean to the press and the public that she was guilty of a crime.

She was, she writes, in “a sweat of bewilderment,” determined not to take part in a witch hunt, but panicked also at the thought of prison. The rights and wrongs were obvious to her. She thought of the members of the Committee as scoundrels, as sleazy opportunists. She saw them engaged in an inquisition indifferent to truth and to decency. She knew that she had to resist these people. Still, though the call of principle was clear, the voice of prudence also made itself heard. Jail would be hard to take. And she was of course aware that prudence often shames principle. She couldn’t be sure she would stand her ground. Other witnesses, as angry as she, had turned in the end and run for cover.

In this frame of mind, she consulted Abe Fortas, then a lawyer in private practice, many years still from joining the Supreme Court. Fortas thought that “the time had come . . . for somebody to take a moral position . . . , to say, in essence, I will testify about myself, answer all your questions about my own life, but I will not tell you about anybody else, stranger or friend.”¹ This suggested a new approach, but it would be risky. If the Committee refused to allow it, she could no longer plead the Fifth Amendment. Having offered to talk about herself would imply she had nothing to hide. That would keep her from saying that talking about others could incriminate her.

Hellman seized on Fortas’s suggestion. Here would be some dignity, some show of proper resistance; at least she wouldn’t rat on her friends. When she appeared before the Committee, she made her offer and the Committee rejected it. After that, she refused to answer questions. How she avoided a contempt citation never fully came clear.

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What made Hellman's issue so difficult? I have reported the problem she had as an inner conflict, as a conflict of prudence and principle, a conflict of her self-interest and the principles she lived by. This, however, puts it badly, for her principles were *part* of her self, a part of the person her prudence served. Besides, not all conflicts are worrisome. What made Hellman's so troubling? Perhaps she thought she had to do justice to all that she then cared about. In that case her issue was one of integrity, of being her full whole self. But could she have had (or been) a whole self before she put the parts together? And wasn't that just what she found so hard, to settle her conflict, to form a whole self?

2 IN OLD VIENNA

Not every difficult choice connects with a public political problem. There are narrowly personal issues that are as troubling as any. No one but you may care what you do, but often that makes it no easier.

A psychoanalysis is an engagement as personal as any can get. Should you invest the time and money? If the analysis is a success, it could reshape your life. If it fails, it could leave you worse off. Ought you to get involved? The issue was faced in the 1920s by the young Bruno Bettelheim, not yet an analyst himself or even planning to be one. In those days, in Freud's Vienna, the time investment was serious. A proper analysis meant six days a week, an hour a day, and it lasted for months.

There was no question of principle here. The question was about the results: Would they be worth what they cost? But what results could Bettelheim expect? And what would count as success? This last raised a special complication, for an analysis might affect his judgment. It might work a change in his values. It might turn him into a person whose values he wouldn't now approve but who then thought the change in himself had been a change for the good. Hellman writes that she told herself, "Just

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make sure you come out unashamed." She could have said, "Whatever happens, make sure that you keep your integrity." But what might later shame Bettelheim – or what he might then be glad he had done – depended on how he now chose. Can one demand integrity of oneself while arranging to make oneself over?

He consulted Richard Sterba, a well-regarded analyst, and asked whether he needed treatment. Sterba replied that he had no idea. He said he might know in a year or two, by which time Bettelheim would know that himself. Bettelheim asked whether analysis would help him. Again Sterba said that he didn't know, that only time would tell.

These answers left Bettelheim undecided. So he asked what point there was to going into analysis. What good could he expect from it? He reports that Sterba told him "that I would find the experience very interesting because I would discover things about myself that I had not known before. This would permit me to understand myself better and would make many aspects of my life and behavior more comprehensible to me."²

Bettelheim says that this settled it. Here was a man who didn't pretend, who didn't promise the moon, a man who could be trusted. But trust had not been the problem. The issue had been the costs and benefits: Was an analysis worth the trouble? And would an after-analysis approval of his analysis deserve any credence? This remained as open as ever, Sterba's remark having left it untouched. Indeed, that remark had been commonplace. It had said nothing that Bettelheim didn't know. How then did Bettelheim's doubts get lifted? Was there any logic to his reaction to being told what he knew all along?

We might have also asked these questions about how Hellman reacted to Fortas. How had Fortas helped her? How did his suggestion solve her problem? Her resistance to ratting remained, and so did her fear of jail. How then did the line he suggested get her to make up her mind? It may be that his

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calling it a “moral position” did the job for her, but why should these words have been so effective? How can a turn of phrase pull weight?

3 SOPHIE'S CHOICE

Here is a case very different, this one to chill the blood. The incident is fictional, but its sources are real enough.

William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* is set in New York in the late 1940s and speaks of the life of a troubled young woman. Sophie enters as an enigma; not until the end of the book is any light shed on it. We then learn that she was caught in a roundup in Nazi-occupied Poland and that she and her small son and daughter were shipped to the death camp at Auschwitz. There, on the entrance loading-ramp, the SS doctors made their “selections,” deciding who was to go to the left, to the gas ovens, and who to the right, to the labor gangs. The doctor she faced was drunk, and the news that she wasn't Jewish provoked him to do her a favor:

The doctor said, “You may keep one of your children.”

Sophie didn't understand.

“You may keep one of your children,” he repeated. “The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?”

“You mean, I have to choose?”

“You're a Polack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege – a choice.”

Her thought processes dwindled, ceased. Then she felt her legs crumble. “I can't choose! I can't choose!” She began to scream . . .

The doctor was aware of unwanted attention. “Shut up!” he ordered. “Hurry now and choose. Choose, goddamnit, or I'll send them both over there. Quick!” . . .

“Mama!” She heard Eva's thin but soaring cry at the instant that she thrust the child away from her . . . “Take the baby!” she called out. “Take my little girl!”³

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One reading of this ghoulish story is that the doctor got Sophie to join him. He made her an accomplice in the killing of her child. He got her to help with at least one “selection.” But Styron also suggests something else, that the doctor failed with her, that she never did choose. Or rather, he leaves this matter dark. Her daughter cried out for attention, and Sophie, gripped by the cry, said “Take her!” Speaking these words wasn’t choosing. What Sophie brought about, she didn’t decide, she didn’t *choose* to bring about. This would mean that she foiled the doctor, that she kept herself from him.

Sophie herself never saw it that way, and she never forgave herself. Perhaps there was more than she cared to report. Perhaps she recalled what she kept unspoken: her being suddenly drawn to her son, her being jolted by the girl’s cry into the knowledge that she loved the boy more. In that case, perhaps she did choose. Perhaps – but did she or didn’t she?

Sophie thrust the child forward. She had to act somehow, and so she did. But her action wasn’t a choice, no more so than saying “Take her!” was. Here the reader may get uneasy. If an action isn’t a choice, what *is* a choice? What is it to *choose*? We could have asked the same question before. When Hellman chose, what was it she did? At one moment, she was “bewildered”; at the next, her mind was made up. What happened in between? What happened was that she chose, and to choose is to make up one’s mind. Yes, but what is the *making up* of a mind?

This question is light-years from Auschwitz. It may well seem far removed from any pressing issues of life. We want to talk about practical matters, about the real choices that trouble real people, and that may make for impatience here. When we consider how hard life can be, we may dismiss mere philosophy. Still, in a book, we are speaking of life; we are not trying to live it. We are standing off for a while, hoping to see how it all hangs together. In this book, we will look at our choices and at the

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Sophie's Choice

reasons we have for them. We will speak of inner conflict and of risk and ambiguity, and we will ask what it means to choose rightly. But not much can be said about choosing unless we first say what choosing is. So we will start the next chapter with that.

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HAVING REASONS

WE have to make choices, like it or not. And we often have a reason for the choice we are making. What is a choice? What is a reason? These are two basic questions here, and we need answers to them.

1 OPTIONS

Not just anything can be chosen. You can't choose to live forever. You can't choose to fly like a bird. This not because you can't in fact fly but because you don't think that you can. What you are choosing must be an option. It must be something you think you could do, something you think now up to you. Where you think nothing is up to you, you don't have any options. You are not facing an issue and don't have a choice to make.

First, about issues and options. A person has a choice to make – we will say that he faces an *issue* – only where he has options to choose from, and an *option* is (in part) an action he thinks up to him. In making a choice, we settle some issue. We fix on one of the options we have. And an option is an action we think we are free to take.

We think we are *free* to take an action where we think it is up to us, where we think we would take that action if we wanted to. Suppose that Hellman's situation were even worse than the one she reported – suppose that she had no money. She would then have faced no problem of choosing which lawyer to get to advise her. She could of course have made a list and asked herself who would be best. But she would have known from the

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Options

start that no lawyer would take her case. Knowing that she wasn't free to get the person she picked from her list, she wouldn't have had any options. So there would have been nothing to choose.

Choices presuppose options, and having the option of doing something implies that you think you are free to do it. On a more usual way of speaking, it isn't your *thinking* you are free that counts but rather your *being* free. On this, your options needn't be actions you think you would take if you settled on them. They needn't be actions you think up to you. They are actions now up to you, whether or not you think they are. ("You can't choose love," the song says; the point may be that it's not up to you whether or not you fall in love, even if you think that it is.)

Let us avoid this second idea. The distinction between our being free and thinking we are free should matter. It should be possible to say of someone that he was free to do this or that but didn't know it and so couldn't choose. Also, that he chose to do it, thinking he was free, but wasn't.

Again, to choose, we must think we are free. Someone who thinks he is locked in a room has no choice about whether to leave. There is nothing for him to decide – even if that door in fact isn't locked. Also, what we choose to do, we needn't be free to do. We may choose from a restaurant menu only to learn that the kitchen is closed. We thought we could get the roast-chicken special; we *thought* that was up to us. Our being kept from getting that dinner doesn't mean that we didn't choose it.

Still, thinking that things are up to us doesn't suffice for choosing. Where we think that anything goes, we are not facing an issue. To choose, to have an issue to settle, we must admit certain limits. We must admit two sorts of constraints – call the first sort *only-one* constraints and the other *one-of-these* constraints.

We may have many options, but we must think we can take only one. Sometimes the *only-one* constraint is imposed by mere

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logic. We know we can't go both east and west. We know it has to be only one, and so, at some point, we have to choose. We know we can go both east and fast, so we don't have a choice to make there. Sometimes the constraints we are under are social. A person may have to choose between two possible careers, the current social realities allowing him only one. But most of us don't have to choose between a career and a marriage. We believe that we can have both, and so we don't face any issue in that.

There are also constraints of this sort that we impose on ourselves. Neither logic nor society rule out our overeating. We ourselves have ruled that out. We could have both the chicken and fish but for that rule we imposed on ourselves. With that rule in place, however, we now have to choose. People who let themselves eat as they please face no issue on such a matter; they have no choice to make.

We constrain ourselves further too: we want it to be *one of just these*. A chooser wants to make up his mind in some one of some set of ways, so he first has to shape that set. He must lay out the lines of action from which he will choose. Suppose you are thinking where to go in the summer and have it down to either England or France. Going to England and going to France are then your two options, and your choice must be one or the other. Going to Spain is not an option, and neither is jumping out of the window; you can't choose one of these. You can of course often start all over and expand the set of your options, but you can only choose in the end from the options you then have before you.

We have said that the agent must think of each of his options that he is free to take it, that he would take it if he wanted to. We must add that he doesn't yet want to take any particular one of them – that his mind is still *open*. Where his mind is made up on a subject, the issue is settled; there is nothing to choose.¹ Also, that he doesn't yet think of any option that he will take it or that he won't. Call this the *liveness* condition. If Hellman thought she